

An Interview with Peter Johnson



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Becoming a Filmmaker

My name is Peter Johnson. I've been a filmmaker all my life—it's the only thing I know how to do. I can't imagine doing anything else or having any competence at anything else.

Now I live in Orem, Utah, but I grew up on a ranch in Idaho—way out in the middle of nowhere, hardly any population around us. Every town in Idaho has to be near some other town, because they're all small towns except for Boise, and it's not a big town. I grew up in Cambridge, Idaho, which is up at the base of the panhandle. It's by Tamarack and above Weiser, Idaho.

When all my peers were looking at Saturday movies, matinees, and seeing three or four movies a week, I saw maybe two films a year.

Yet, when I was a little child, whenever I was asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I always said, "I'm going to be a filmmaker."

I don't know where that came from; I don't know what provoked it. I guess the few movies I saw must have made an impression, and it has always been my interest in life.

When I was in the military at the end of the Vietnam War, I ended up working in the medical area, and it was satisfying. I was adept at it; I was pretty good at it. I wasn't a doctor, but I was good at helping doctors. I helped them in surgery and the whole thing, and I thought, *Well, this is serious; this is important work. I seem to be okay at it; I could probably get a PhD or a doctoral degree. That's what I'll do.*

I came back and got admitted into a school, but then I gave it some serious pondering and thought. I decided, *No, I'm supposed to be a filmmaker.* I never went to medical school because I was immediately struggling with the idea of being a filmmaker. It was actually a very spiritual experience—a meditation. It involved thinking it through, praying about it, and it became a very strong impression to me that this is what I was supposed to do. So I'm a filmmaker.

I don't really know what instilled in me this passion for making films. All I know is that it was always there. We didn't have dinnertime conversations about the latest art or movies, and hardly anybody in my family saw movies. It was family that was the salt of the earth. We lived on a big ranch, we raised cattle, we raised wheat, and that was my childhood. It was hard work, hot work in the summer, but that's what I knew. I think that does have an effect on who I am as a filmmaker, because I've made quite a few films for the Church that deal with Church history in the rural areas, and that's a very easy thing for me to do.

I think one of the triggers to my imagination—this is going to make me sound really old, but we lived out in the middle of nowhere where there was no television, but we did have radio—I would listen to radio dramas. That triggers your imagination. You've got to make the pictures in your own mind. That had a very important influence on me. I would lie on the living room floor and turn on my favorite radio shows—*Johnny Dollar*, *The Shadow*, all the shows like that—and let my imagination go. It was a pretty exciting thing for me. I saw the movie in my mind very clearly.

Film from a Religious Point of View

I think it's a good thing for an LDS film student or a LDS Church member to go to the Lord and say, "Should I be a filmmaker? Is that what you want me to be?" That's what I did. It was instilled in me long before I asked that question, but that's what I did; I think that's the right thing, a good thing to do.

When you get an answer, then you follow that answer. That doesn't mean it's going to be easy; it doesn't mean that the Lord is going to hand it to you on a silver platter, nor does it mean that you are the one and only ordained filmmaker. The fact of the matter is, the Lord needs a lot of filmmakers. From a religious standpoint, we Latter-day Saints have a lot of things to say to the world, not just about our doctrine or our history or our scriptures. We have lots of other things to say. We have a point of view that has become realized through our devotion to our faith that I think people would be interested in. It needs to be said. It needs to be spoken.

Many people want to work for the Church. I myself have never had an aspiration to work for the Church directly—that doesn't mean I don't have a tremendous allegiance to the Church. I love it, I'm proud of it, I'm honored to be a member of it, but I don't think you need to work for the

filmmaking unit of the Church to have a satisfying film career. I don't think, for me anyway, that's the objective one should work for. The Church can only hire so many people. It's much better to get out there in the world and let your voice be heard on a much bigger arena.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't take opportunities if the Church were to ask you to come back and do a film for them; by all means, give your talent to the Lord. Give it your very best. But if you can get out into the world and say the things that you want to say, that you believe need to be said, you'll find a resonance that's very authentic, because it comes from your heart and your soul. You're not doing something for any other reason than that. Just because you get an answer that says that's what you should do, it doesn't mean you're the one and only. It means that you ought to be part of a community of LDS filmmakers—supporting, aiding and abetting each other. That would be the society that I'd like to belong to.

By point of view, I mean that each person has a point of view. We're all a product of our own youth, upbringing, and experiences in life, and all of those are then germinated by the fact that they are tempered in our faith—all of which will create a point of view. Each person will have a separate point of view, even though we may have strong feelings that are similar in terms of our devotion to God. We nevertheless have different points of view, and we have been molded by our own faith in certain ways. Everybody will be different. Yes, we are all different people, and we need to be able to express ourselves in our own unique way.

Background in Theatre

I did a lot of theatre study at the beginning of my education, and I did it at BYU. One of my reasons for studying theatre was that there wasn't a film program at BYU. I thought, *Well, I'm going to go to BYU. I've wanted to come here, so I'll take everything that gets me as close to filmmaking as I can.* So I took directing and acting. I got an undergraduate degree in theatre, and I am very grateful that I did. I loved that. In fact, I'd still love to direct some stage work before I hang up my director's cap. It's been a very long time since I've done that, but I'd love to do it again. Theatre gave me a foundation that I really appreciate to this day.

A really important thing for a director to learn is to work with actors, and I think you can learn that very well doing stage work. It's a little different when you're shooting a film as an actor, and also different as a director, but certain fundamentals are very similar. You need to develop in terms of ability to communicate to actors, ability to help them understand what it is you see that they need to do, and an ability to evaluate their performances; all those things are important for a director to learn, and they can be learned on the stage.

There's a discipline that comes from theatre that is also very important. When you're shooting an expensive film, you may be shooting \$150,000 a day or more—or lots more, depending on what kind of films you're able to obtain. Boy, the discipline is important there, because with that kind of money being spent every day, you need to know what you're doing. You need to have been prepared; you need to know how to go out there and direct everybody, not only the actors but the camera and the whole works, in a way that's as efficient as it can possibly be. If you don't, you might not work again.

When you make films for the Church, it is sacred money. When you make films for investors, it is also sacred money. They're trusting you with their money. Right now I'm on the hunt for money—always on the hunt for money. I've got a very big film that will cost millions of dollars. We have some very good response to it, and when these people give me money, that is sacred. I owe them everything I can give them. It isn't something like “Gee, I've got a lot of money now, I'll go buy me a new car and drive around and be famous.” No, that money is sacred. People are going to expect that I, as a director, will do the best I can to make sure it is money well spent for them.

The image of the director who throws caution to the wind when it comes to cost is over-rated, and I don't think there's a great deal of validity to it. Some directors have been that way, but I think the majority of directors who have success have had to work within the budget they've been given. For example, Marlon Brando directed a film that not too many people know, *One Eyed Jacks*. Brando

did a magnificent job. It's a beautiful film. In fact, in comparing it to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, I was stunned by how much the director took from *One Eyed Jacks* and used in *Sundance*. He was a brilliant director, but he went so colossally far over budget—over schedule as well as budget—that he never directed again.

Karl Malden and Marlon Brando were very dear friends, and they were in the group theatre together. They made these great classic films together; they worked with Elia Kazan, who in his day was the Spielberg. He could do any Broadway play he wanted or any movie in Hollywood. That's the power that Elia Kazan had for a while. They worked so closely with him and did great classic films together. When it comes to *One Eyed Jacks*, I don't know whether Karl was kind of a tempering influence on him or not. *One Eyed Jacks* is a magnificent film.

Transition from Theatre to Film

I had been drafted in the military, and when I got out, I came back to BYU to get a master's degree, and that was also in theatre, but focused more on film. There was a little more I could do with film in those intervening couple of years. I made my own way, if you will, in terms of the film part of it. There was no formal program. That proved to be extremely fortuitous for me, because in the last year that I was a graduate student, Charles Metten brought Karl Malden to BYU, and I was assigned to be his assistant director.

That started a very close relationship. He immediately turned to me—it was one of those wonderful things that sometimes happens, and sometimes does not, where we just connected. That was probably somewhere in the very late 70s. 1979-80. Karl Malden and I were not only great friends, he was a magnificent mentor for me. He took me under his wing, and we did the show at BYU, which was a great success and a marvelous experience. He had just finished doing *Patton*, and he went back home. Then he called me up and said, "I'm doing a television series called *The Streets of San Francisco*, and I'd like you to come down and work with me." I squealed rubber all the way to L.A.

The Streets of San Francisco

This was film. It was a one-camera show shot exactly like a motion picture. Michael Douglas was my age and just starting in his career, as was I. He had done a little bit of acting, but not a lot, and he and Karl were the two stars. It was a detective show, and the third star of the show was San Francisco. We shot literally on the streets of San Francisco. We were everywhere. I can tell you everything about San Francisco. Including what comes out of the buildings at three in the morning in San Francisco. It was an amazing experience. San Francisco is very photogenic. You can point the camera anywhere, and it is magnificent. It is a great city to shoot in. It's a beautifully photogenic city.

I spent nearly all of my time with Karl as his dialogue director—it wasn't just running lines, though we did that, it was analyzing character. His character was Mike Stone. He had his character set, but that doesn't mean the character didn't have variances and would not react to different circumstances in different ways. We had other characters that were created for each episode.

Karl, knowing that I aspired to be a film director, would talk a lot about directing—we spent hours talking. I was with him at all times. When he went into his trailer, I went into his trailer. When he went on the set, I went on the set. We spent so much time together, sixteen hours a day, that I was spending more time with him during that period than he spent with his wife. And we just talked. We talked about the industry. We talked about what was good about it. We talked about acting, about how to direct actors. This is a man who had started his career on Broadway, where he had directed and acted in many great shows, and he had worked with some of the very finest directors and writers there. Now he had moved and was working; he had a career in the motion picture business. He had the discipline, both of the theatre and of film. That was my background as well.

We talked a lot about how to work with actors, how to compose shots, how to tell stories, the relationships of characters, and so forth; a great experience for me. I learned a lot of theory, and I had studied a lot at BYU, and that introduced me to Karl Malden. It was plunging right into the business, with a kind man who had put his arm around my shoulder and led me through the early

stages of actually working with a huge crew, working at high speed on a top-rated show at that time, with all the pressures that go with that. That's where I learned the film business.

I think the show, a Quinn Martin Production, finished in '76. Quinn Martin had all of these shows going on, a lot of them were detective shows—not every one of them, but a lot of them.

Karl used to complain a little bit; he would say, "You know, I think Quinn is just recycling these scripts through." That would have been a smart thing to do: just change each situation a little bit.

Karl would say, "I saw this story on one of Quinn's shows."

It was a real factory for a while for Quinn Martin. He was the top of the game, pumping shows out.

Going back to BYU

Karl Malden came to me after the first season that I worked with him, and he was a little apologetic, which amazed me.

He said, "Peter, this has been a great year. I've really enjoyed working with you; would you mind if I had you in my contract for all my films?"

A big smile on my face, I said, "Are you kidding me? I've been working for a professional now for one year. Let's do it."

He was just that great of a guy. So we did several seasons of *Streets*. Then that show ended, and we did one show after another. Different kinds—a mini-series and feature films, and so forth. I was with Karl for about eight years, or a little more than that. By then I was getting to the point that I was thinking, *Okay, this has been phenomenal. I have worked with a master talent in the industry; I have learned so much from him and from the experience. It's time for me to launch forth now.*

At that point, the phone rang.

It was Harold Oaks at BYU, saying, "You know, we want to really kick the film program up a notch or two or three. Would you come to BYU and take over the film program?"

There really weren't a lot of steps—it was just that, a phone call. Of course BYU had to go through the motions of an interview, but it was a done deal from the phone call on. Harold Oaks was the one who called me, and so I came up.

I went to Malden and said, "You know, I have this opportunity to go and redo a film program, really establish a film program—but I also want to have a career. My career goal is not to be academician. I'm happy to do that. In fact, I'm very excited about the potential of doing that, but I also want to have a career."

We talked about it, and I also wanted to let him know I wouldn't be available for movies while I was gone.

He said, "You know what? You're a young man. Why don't you go up to BYU for five years? In five years you can do a lot, and at the end of five years, come back. You're still young, you'll still conquer Hollywood."

I thought, *That's what I'll do.* How many people get to go to a major university and establish a film program? Not very many people have that opportunity, and so I came to BYU.

Reestablishing the Film Program at BYU

One of my objectives when I came to BYU to reestablish the film program was to give students an opportunity to see what it was like to work in a real, functioning studio. I established three objectives—they only lasted for a short period of time, but in that short period of time, I think there were some really great results.

The first objective was for students to have a good, rigorous academic experience on campus—to learn the theory, to learn the history, to see a lot of films—so the students could develop their background in motion pictures. That was important; I hadn't had that as a child, and I recognized that you need to have that filmic literature behind you. So we established that as one of the requirements. Then of course, we had whatever other academic learning and training the students could get at the university.

The Motion Picture Studio was the second objective. I was put over the studio not long after I was put over the academic program, and I wanted to establish a situation there where the film students could go to the studio and to work as interns. Whether they were sweeping the sound stage and running errands, or they were working in the prop department, wardrobe department, camera department, or editing department, I wanted them to see what a real studio was like. This implied that we were trying to create a real studio environment. It was very important that they have that vision, so that when they left with their degree and launched into their career, they took background with them. They'd seen what it is to shoot on a sound stage, not just in somebody's garage. They'd seen what it is to work side by side with professional filmmakers. That experience was important.

We added the third component, which was important not only for the health and strength of the Motion Picture Studio itself, but also for the film program, and primarily for the students. We tried to bring outside production into the studio, and we did. We brought in at least one Disney movie, and a couple of HBO movies. The objective was to have the students work on mainstream films, out of Los Angeles, so that they could gain that experience. We always used our staff on those shows, and we also always brought in people from LA. In fact, some of the bigger films we did at the studio that were not from LA were even sometimes Church films. I tried to import as many people from LA as I could to work on the crew, so we could not only enhance the films themselves, but also so the students and my staff could rub shoulders with these people—talk shop, learn the latest techniques, and all of that. So when the students graduated, they graduated with their degree and academic training, they graduated with the experience of working side by side on films, and they graduated having worked on some mainstream films. Now they had a résumé. They were people who could go and knock on doors in LA. That was the objective, and I thought that was a pretty unique thing to create at BYU. It was unique opportunity, because we had the Motion Picture Studio.

As I looked at establishing the film program, I had certain advantages. Number one, I knew BYU well; I knew most of the faculty, because they had been there when I was a student. Charles Metten was still there, Harold Oaks, and many others. There were also some new people.

I also knew BYU's program very well. I had sort of bludgeoned my way through it to get my own degree in film. I also knew the Motion Picture Studio because before I went to work with Karl, I had worked there for a little while under Judge Whitaker. I understood that, and then I had made some films as a freelancer once I moved to Los Angeles. So I knew the studio very well; I knew the lay of the land well.

One of the steps I made was to go to some of the studios and study some of the film programs—NYU had a pretty good film program, and also USC and UCLA. I wanted to check and see what was working for them—how they did it, how it worked, and so forth; because I hadn't really focused on that very much; I'd only gone to some studios. We also had a meeting with Roy Disney, the son, and got some great ideas from him.

Then when I came back, I met with some of my colleagues, some of my peers. I remember talking to Sterling Van Wagenen; I went up to one of Robert Redford's cabins and spent a day brainstorming ideas for the program. That was helpful. I met with other people too. Through that brainstorming, along with my personal experience, I formed together what I thought might be the most valuable curriculum for film students coming in who knew nothing—so they could gain some experience, so that when they graduated they wouldn't just be thrown to the dogs; they'd be able to actually do something—have a career and work their way into it. So that was the process that I followed.

It then became a terrific amount of work. I was working sixteen-hour days writing up the curriculum for every course. It was murder, and I was all by myself, essentially.

Harold Oaks would stick his head in now and then, give me a thumbs up and say, "How are you doing? Do you need any help?"

Very shortly after I got it through the curriculum committee of the university, they said, "We want you to continue to run the program, but Jesse Stay's retiring at the Motion Picture Studio, and we want you to take that over as well." That became a difficult decision, and we killed ourselves to get the two programs put together.

I was having my children at this time, and I would see them in the morning when they were asleep, and I would see them at night when I came home. My secretary called me a workaholic, and as I looked back on it, I was. In fact, I was chastised by the vice president of BYU, who I reported to—I had two lines of reporting, which was a little confusing, and he was one of them.

He told me, “It is unacceptable that you have not had a vacation.”

In about the first five years, I didn’t have one day of vacation, and I worked many of the holidays. I would arrive at the studio at four o’clock in the morning, and often did not leave until nine o’clock at night.

To be successful and to learn your craft—to become good at it, to hone it and shape it—requires all you have to give. Furthermore, any director, any filmmaker, and any producer will tell you it’s a very hard job to make a motion picture that’s any good. It’s a very hard job, a demanding discipline, an art form that requires much attention in every direction.

By confessing the amount of hours I put in, I also confess my sin. That was not a good thing to do. I would not do it again, but it was necessary to do in order to achieve what I wanted to achieve. Nobody was holding a whip over me and threatening to crack it, but there were certain expectations, and I had my own personal expectations. I wanted this to become a great film program, and I wanted the studio to become a great studio. Not that it hadn’t been in the past, but we were moving now, taking the next step forward. I look back now, I think, *I should have disciplined myself*. I read books about how some great CEOs spend time with their families, and I’m embarrassed. My kids are all wonderful kids; they all love me, they don’t hate me. We have a wonderful family, all great kids, but that was something that I wouldn’t do over again, and I wouldn’t recommend it. I think you have to establish what your values are and then you try to follow those values.

Well, we managed to get the program put together and the studio up and running so that we could have that dimension of the film program at the studio. We called it *boot camp*. I don’t know if it’s still called that or not, but we would get the students involved as much as we could. We would have involved them more if we could have, but they had academic classes, and we knew that. We only had them for a short period of time, but we tried to do the best we could for them. It was hard to put them on a crew, because ideally you have to have stability in a crew; you can’t have somebody who was coming and going. There were lots of challenges.

Hiring Faculty Members

One of the challenges of the academic program was getting instructors. The ideal at USC or UCLA is being right at the back door of the industry, and so they have a lot of big-name directors, writers, and producers who will come and teach a class. That’s a wonderful experience for the students.

BYU also has the unique requirement that they prefer faculty who are members of the Church, and that has become a stronger requirement over time. I was faced with *I can’t teach every class and run a studio and make movies. It’s just too much. Impossible. So what do we do?* So I went out to all my friends who were filmmakers, all my colleagues, and tried to recruit them to teach at least one class. I had very limited success at that. There were a few—not that there weren’t good LDS people in the film industry who would have been wonderful—but they were interested in pursuing their careers. They loved the idea of coming and meeting with students and teaching them, but they didn’t want to commit even to a semester, and certainly not a year, or longer than that. It was very hard, but we just kept trying. I wanted to bring in as many outside people as I could so that the students could get as broad a perspective of the industry as they could.

Vision for the Students

From my perspective, the whole idea for the film program was to give students valuable theoretical and practical experience that would allow them to go to Hollywood and have contacts already there. They would have a résumé already made with some good solid credits on it and have the ability to get themselves moving in the business—whatever aspect of the business they wanted to

go into, whether it was the writing side or directing or producing or camerawork or editing, or whatever part.

So we tried to have a practical side to the program, which was murder, because of the equipment—how do you manage the equipment? How do you maintain the equipment? Harold Oaks had no idea the Frankenstein he was creating that would cost all this money. That was part of the reason of using the studio in the program, because we would allow the students to use certain equipment. That minimized the kind of equipment we needed to have for the academic program. We couldn't let them use our A cameras and such; we couldn't jeopardize that and have a well-meaning student drop a camera by accident. But there were other pieces of gear they could use, so we allowed them to use it. At the same time, I was trying to beef up the studio so that it could be a really top-notch studio. That's a story in and of itself, and it was not an easy thing to do.

The Motion Picture Studio

The main concern was that the Motion Picture Studio be a self-sustained unit. It was not a funded entity of the university; we had to pay for ourselves. We had to run it as if it were a commercial company, and a lot of people didn't understand that. They didn't appreciate the fact that that was what we were working under. It had been created that way from the very beginning with Judge Whitaker. The studio had to make its own way through the movies it made—through the budgets of the movies that were presented to the Church in the earliest days. It included the overhead of running the studio and paying the salaries of the people who worked there, plus the actual costs of film and everything else. That had never changed. When I took it over, it was exactly the same. It was a great challenge to be able to improve the studio so that we could produce films with the latest equipment; hire the best people we could hire, both freelance and full-time staff; and have a terrific core of people there to work with—and thus be able to make really good, top-line films.

Years later, I had a meeting with one of the vice presidents of BYU, a good man. I had great relationships with the University staff; it was a wonderful thing. I enjoyed it, I loved my work here, and he was a very good man.

He smiled, sitting across his desk, and said, "We only see the world through blue and white glasses, and you're neither blue nor white."

Oh, I laughed at that, and I knew I was in trouble. Not really trouble, but the problem was that even the University leadership sometimes struggled with, "What is this studio? It's not really an academic department; we don't fund it, so it has to make its own way, but we're liable for it."

I went to President Holland, the president of the university at the time, and said, "I get calls from General Authorities, and I know that the protocol is for me never to talk to anybody in Salt Lake City unless I go through you. That's the protocol, and I support and understand that."

He looked at me and said, "I don't want to get between you and the Brethren and making movies. You just make really great movies, so when I meet with them, I get the kudos." He said it with a laugh, but he was very supportive—understanding and loving. He said, "I haven't a clue how to run a studio. You just run that studio."

And I did. I was only working with the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. The seventy hardly knew me. I only had anything to do with two or three. It was only the First Presidency and the Quorum of Twelve. They were the decision makers. I didn't have to deal with all the layers of committees that you find there, and it was much easier for me.

I would pick up the phone and call one of the Twelve and say, "I need approval for this or that, and I want your opinion on this." I would get it, and that was that.

So we were able to move with lightning speed on some of these projects. People were astonished at what we were doing. Even some of the university officials at that time were a little anxious.

"What's happening here? Things are moving very rapidly."

That's because I was sitting down with the Brethren at their request, and they were giving me direction in what I should be doing in making a film, or in terms of other questions I had for them. It was a great experience.

However, at the same time, I was also running the academic department. Finally after a couple years, I said, "I just cannot do all this." That's when they understood, because I couldn't. My teaching was falling off. It wasn't as good as it should have been. I didn't feel good about that. I thought, *The best way I can teach is just to take care of the students when they get here and give them as good of an experience as I possibly can.*

I worked to build the academic program for only a short period of time—to get it underway and integrate it into the studio as much as we could—but those times were the formative times. Then I had to stop to focus all my time on the studio. Once the studio started flourishing—we started getting a lot of Church work to begin with and other work coming in later—it was just way too much for me to handle.

So I told the University, "I can't do all of this. I've got to focus on the studio."

The way I could help the students then, going forward, was at the studio itself. We absolutely wanted the students to keep coming there, to be a part of it and to use whatever we could provide them with, and it was not easy. They always wanted more than we could provide. The professors on campus thought we should be giving the students more too. They didn't appreciate the fact that it was not funded by the University and that we had a huge production program going on that required all of our attention—we needed all of our equipment, the best of our equipment at least, for that. We gave the students what we could, but I think some students got a little upset at me, because I didn't give them carte blanche to have the studio at their beck and call. It was not part of the academic program. It was a resource only to the degree that we could integrate students in and help them have that experience at the studio.

My feelings for the academic program are actually very tender. I have good feelings for it. For example, I would love in my dotage to come and teach a class now and then. I felt good about the fact that we got the film program up and running, got it through the curriculum, and got it established with all the credentials the university had to apply to it. We got it so that they could integrate with the studio more than it had ever been done in the past, and that was important to me so we would meet the three-pronged objective for the students.

I think maybe one of the reasons there is a certain tenderness about it is because I wasn't able to stay with it a long stretch of time. It was impossible for me to do, and there's always been a lingering feeling about that. When you create something, you care about it.

Mentorship in the Academic Program

I've only shared maybe three percent of what I'd love to share. That sounds a little egocentric, doesn't it? It's just that I had a unique experience—I don't think there are many people who start their careers having somebody embrace them as Karl did me. Since he was such a phenomenal power in the industry, I myself was surprised. I knew him as an actor; I'd known he'd won an Academy Award; I knew he was working in the group theater and had a rich, rich background. I did my master's degree on his life. When I arrived in LA, I realized, *Wow, this man is almost revered.*

What was great about Karl was that he would take me with him. He respected me. He gained an appreciation for me. He loved and respected BYU. He was a moral man, and he loved our morality; it was almost like working with a General Authority—close to that level, and I mean that sincerely. He was an honest man, a good man, a loving man, a caring man, a family man. Before he died, he celebrated, I think, his 60th wedding anniversary. That's a rarity in the film industry. He was simply a great, great man.

He became the president of the Academy for a while, and because he respected where I came from and who I was, he would take me to all of his negotiating meetings. That gave me a vision into the industry that few get. I was more than a fly on the wall, and was hated and resented by everybody

there, who wondered, *Who is this young upstart and why is he here?* We would sit with major studio heads, major network heads, major producers, and discuss whether or not a show should continue or not.

One of the things I will forever hold dear to my heart is the fact that this legend in the industry—already a legend when I started working with him—treated me almost as an equal. He taught me, but taught me by uplifting me. When I would make a mistake, which of course I did, he would be very compassionate about it, never condemning, and I respected him for that. It was a wonderful thing, so it made me flourish.

I think that is how faculty should relate to their students. It's a mentoring thing. You respect the students, because they come with their own intelligence and their own knowledge and their own abilities. The students should respect the professor, because professors have experience that the students don't have. They have understandings and academic abilities that the students don't have. It ought to be a real society of learning together.

It's an opportunity, I think, and maybe that's what attracts me to teaching. Maybe it's why I was attracted when Harold Oaks called me to begin with. There is still a pull here.

I'll meet students and they'll say, "I just graduated from BYU."

I'll say, "Tell me about the program. How's it doing? How's it working? I'm really interested to know how everything's working."

I care about the students. I want to see us develop a great cadre of magnificent filmmakers. There's no reason why we shouldn't have the finest filmmakers; the biggest names in the industry ought to be some of our people. There's no reason that we can't do that without compromising our standards.

The Gospel and Film

One of the things I tried to instill, in the short time I was teaching students, was that in the eternal scheme of things, filmmaking is not even a speck on the wall. Keep that perspective in mind, because you don't want to sell your soul for nothing. What doth it profit a man to gain all of Hollywood and lose your soul? Come on. You're brighter than that. Surely, you intelligent students are brighter than that.

Much better to use the faith we have and that we believe in, knowing that we have the gift of the Holy Ghost, who knows how to make a movie better than any man standing on the face of the earth right now. Tap into that. President Packer talks about the fact that we live below our privileges as members of the Church; and as LDS filmmakers, that's one of the privileges we live below. Tap into that spirit. You don't have to be making Church movies; you don't have to have anybody even know you're an LDS filmmaker. I never wore my religion on my sleeve when I was working in LA, but others always found out in about three days after we started a new show. Wherever you are working, you can use those blessings that God provides. He is anxious for us to use those spiritual blessings so we can become the best that we can be. That of course also means we have to work our heads off.

When we go back to our fundamental theology, we believe that we are all children of God. That means that people who are not members of our church are our brothers and sisters. The Savior made it very clear we should love them as much as we love ourselves. When we're making films, we want to reach those people.

I'll give you an example of my own feelings about this. I shot a documentary in Yemen, and also in Oman, and in several other Arab countries, this was right during the period of 9/11. I fell in love with some of those people over there. I respected them. There was a man named Abdullah in Oman who I adore. It was for me like being with a Holy Man. I loved being with him. He was pure—pure of heart and of mind; kind and compassionate and loving. He became a dear friend immediately. I love that man, and because of the positive experience of knowing him, I thought, *I would love to make a film for that audience with my western perspective, and my religious values—if I could find just the right story for that audience.* It would be an expression, if you will, of my love for them.

Abdullah discovered I was a member of the Church. He had been educated in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he had been assigned to live with an American family who happened to be LDS, so he had that background. He was probably the only man in Oman, or the only Omani, who had that kind of understanding of Mormons.

One day, we were way out at some little drinking place, a little oasis out in the middle of the desert. It was boiling hot, with big sand dunes everywhere you looked. I was shooting some detail shots of figs or something, and the crew was getting a cold drink. I got in the car ready to go. I sat in the back seat and Abdullah jumped in the passenger seat—we had a driver.

Abdullah jumped in the car, he swung around, looked at me, and said, “Are you Mormon?” Out of the clear blue.

I said, “Well, yes, I am.”

He asked, “Is everybody Mormon on the crew?”

“They are.”

“Oh, I’m so happy,” he said. “I thought so, because they kept trying to offer the crew coffee, and everybody turned it down.”

What an impossible connection. So from that time on—sometimes we would have two hours to drive between locations—we would talk about and compare our religions. I discovered we’re closer together than we are apart, and it was a great experience.

LDS Filmmakers

Besides the threefold effort for the film students that I’ve described, there were my responsibilities to get the Motion Picture Studio up and running, and we did that. It became a state-of-the-art facility, and we had a wonderful crew working there. We were doing a lot of work, and it was an exciting, thrilling time to be there. It was just one film after another—if not coming from the Church, then coming from other directions.

Finally, enough years had gone by that we started seeing some of the film students that had graduated, had gone to LA, worked there for a few years doing whatever, decided to create their own film companies, and go for it.

We did have permission to bring in the Disney films; we did have permission to do some outside movies. They had to meet our standards and all of those things, of course, but I thought, *Wouldn’t it rapidly advance President Kimball’s vision of the artists if we could have the Motion Picture Studio be like a home base? Then those students who studied here, who cut their teeth at the studio, went to LA and gained that experience, and then in years to come, created their own production companies, could feel like this was a friendly and comfortable place to come back and make their films?* I had a vision that we would just have one after another come back, and the former students would be mentoring the new students. Thus you would have kind of a Zion society of filmmakers.

Now, that’s a little optimistic, I guess, and maybe even a little Utopian, but that seemed actually doable to me. Looking at the history of how so many BYU students burst forth and made their own Mormon movies, that would indicate that we probably could have made it work. I don’t know of any great filmmaker who isn’t a bit Utopian in their vision of things. I think you have to be.

I think our mandate on this earth is to bring the best out of life, the best out of relationships. It’s all about relationships, whether it’s working relationships or other kinds. We offend each other, we repent, we apologize, we seek forgiveness, we mend our problems, and become stronger and better together in our relationships. That’s what this life is about. It’s all about relationships. The greatest joys in life come from relationships.

One of the reasons I love the film industry and love working as a director is because it is an art form that brings together just about every other art form. You have all these magnificent artists for music and design and art and wardrobing and acting and writing, and all of these magnificent artists are brought together. As a director, I get to work with all of these people. The challenge of a director is to learn to communicate well with them so that you’re bringing all of these different artists together and channeling all of their creative work to create one ultimate work of art.

That is a thrilling prospect for me. I love that. I'm excited about it. It thrills me to this moment. I get excited about my next project—to create another world that didn't exist, a piece of art that didn't exist, with characters that never existed before, and to do it with a bunch of colleagues who are all artists in themselves. Now that's nirvana. That is the joy; that is the appeal, at least to me, of the industry. To do that with my own people, with shared feelings and joys, that's the best.

I think that as Latter-day Saint artists, we are in the world, but we are commanded not to be of the world—we are in fact to reject the world. By rejecting the world, we don't embrace the evils of a fallen world—we who have the truth, we who have the faith that we have, have the priesthood that we have, and have the Holy Ghost as our companion. We who have all these great blessings also have a mandate to reach out to our fellow brothers and sisters in great love and respect to them. That gets us back to where we started. That is, we should make films that reach all people.

There is evil all over the world, and there are evil people in Hollywood, or people who may be good people who do evil things and live an evil lifestyle. There may be some people in Hollywood—I don't know any personally nor do I know of any people—but there may be those who conspire to do evil things in their films. However, I think that most films simply reflect the lifestyle and the perspective of the people who are making the films. It ought to reflect our values and our lifestyle as well. There are also wonderful people in Hollywood. Intelligent people. People of high sensitivity who care about their fellowman.

We as Latter-day Saints have tremendous responsibilities because of the knowledge we have and the blessings we've been given. This doesn't mean that God loves us more than he loves the rest of his children. It doesn't mean that we have a corner on all goodness. We don't. We certainly don't have a corner on all art. We'd better get working really hard so that we can rise to the level we need to be at to compete with some of the people who are at the top of the heap.

I think—without getting too preachy, which I'm getting—it's a great challenge. I don't think we should be afraid of the future. We should know that God is with us and that we should move forward, that we should never be afraid to express our feelings and to be who we are. When we do that, then we'll make the best movies.

Going forward, one of the great challenges of the academic program will be not only to help students be the best they can in the terms of being a filmmaker, but also to help them understand how they should integrate their faith in that process and in that career. That way they are prepared when they go out into the world, and they will be able to stand up under the pressures and storms that will hit them and the heat that will be applied to them to try to turn them away from their own standards.

Unfortunately, we have too many examples of those who are very lovely people, and were wonderful students at BYU, who've abandoned their standards to gain the credit of Hollywood. How much better they would be in their own personal lives had they not done that. How much better they would contribute had they not done that. They might not agree with that, of course, but that's my perspective. It's a sad thing to see those who are highly gifted and highly talented compromise what they have on the altar of gaining some credibility or advantage in Hollywood. For an advantage, I'll stick with the Lord every time. He's the advantage we've got.

I am developing right now two films. One of them is on a Church subject, geared primarily to LDS people, but it's a big film. The other is a film that will reach the general audience, and I think it will be a very popular film. The message is all good, but it's high action, and it's a thrilling subject. We need to be able to use all of the palate that we have in front of us as members of the Church. We shouldn't just think, *Well, I'm an LDS filmmaker, I'll only make LDS stories or only work for the Church.* I think the world needs us more than that.